

Back Again, Back Again: Gold, Part One

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode seventeen: Gold.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Rhia and I spent a morning together for the first time in weeks the day of the feast, and it was like coming home.

Or -- better than coming home. Like -- finding Rhysea again. She said she'd missed seeing me, and that was when I'd realized with a start how little we'd seen of each other in the past weeks.

You lied for me, she'd said, hesitantly, knees pulled up to her chest as she sat in the desk chair.

I laughed bitterly, a spark of anger rekindling in my chest. *Not that it helped much. I should've said something else. I'm sorry.*

Rhia hugged her legs tighter. *It would've been worse. Trust me.* She made a face, and changed the subject, like she'd said something she regretted.

And... she didn't mention it beyond that -- my absence or the events of the tavern night -- because she was Rhia. Because she'd been so heavily reminded of our places in this world, and was hesitant to cross the line. Because *are you fine? Of course,* was a kind lie, one that I'd believed for ease's sake.

We didn't talk about that. Instead, she helped me dress even though it was hours away from time for the festival. I was forbidden from leaving the room until the evening -- for I was a surprise, spoilable, and it would leave a greater impact if no one saw the eligida until the evening came.

So we sat in my room, I in a pretty golden-and-Royal's-blue, midnight-blue dress, high-collared to hide the crooked scar of where I'd been stabbed. There was a dangerous message in the wound, a disquiet that came with showing weakness: *the eligida is not made of impossibilities and immortality. She can fall, despite her magic. Maybe she isn't the savior, long-dreamt.*

There's danger in disquiet. High collars disguised in embroidery and luxury are a good way to keep opinions fixed.

My hair was curly-wild, unrestricted by pins, which meant it fell into my face and I got hair in my mouth and, as the day

wore on, frizz appeared, as it was aught to do. I bemoaned it, as I did practically every day, but with nothing else to do, it seemed particularly dramatic today. Rhia laughed at my antics, curled up in the desk chair. I sprawled out dramatically across the floor, fancying myself a renaissance painting or some shit with the way my dress fanned out around me. It didn't help my mood, or pass the time for long.

It wasn't even noon. The festival wasn't until evening.

What do we doooo, I moaned, so Rhia told me to recite my speech, something I did so many times over the words became a dull rumble in my mind, blurring together as I forgot the pauses, forgot the separation of the words until they were cut into the wrong pieces and what I was saying was *not* Rhysean.

Ilyaas, she sighed, and repeated the section I'd muddled, enunciating the words over and over until I mimicked them back at her.

You know this speech as well as I do, I groaned, still on the floor. *Can you give it for me? Please?* I sat up. *Or can I give it, in English, and you stand and speak over me in Rhysean translation? Like a voice-over?*

She rolled her eyes. *I am staying in this room. You will have to give the speech on your own, Eligidida.*

Eligidida. It sounded as stupid as it meant -- little savior, poor savior, a joke. I moaned in a distinctly non-human

way. *This would be so much easier if I just knew what it meant*
--

You know I can't.

Why not? That spark of anger hadn't let itself out, was threatening to grow. I wanted a confirmation, now -- that the queen was keeping things from me.

It wouldn't be proper, was her half-hearted response. We lapsed into silence, minutes stretching out in the humid almost-thunderstorm-y weather, until, very carefully, she closed her eyes and began to speak.

It took me a minute to recognise that it was the speech.

Dear friends, she said. *I am here because of the rulers who stand before you. Cassius Rex found me and I have taken the sword from the tree, which means the final days of the rebel's tyranny draw near.*

You fight on the right path, the speech promised. *The path that I walk, that the noble kings and their son have led me down, is the path to righteousness and restoration of order. Many of the peasantry have been seduced by the sound of drums, by a false promise of tomorrow. Only standing in order, the law on your side, will ensure victory.*

The rebels grow stronger. But none are stronger than the force of the chosen three. My sovereign, king, I, his sword, his soldier, and a third, his poet.

But we do not yet have a poet. This is what I come here tonight to ask you for.

Search the lands. Send us your musicians, your writers, your dreamers. Send us those whose words make the sky weep and the flowers bloom. And bring them here.

In four weeks, we will have a festival to find this poet. Each performer and patron will be presented before myself and the court to play -- and the winner, our poet, will join the histories yet-to-come. The sponsor, of course, will be rewarded generously.

But for tonight -- eat and drink. Dance, if the urge so strikes you. Thank your kings as I do for the peace they strive towards.

Rellemom a Rex. Thank your kings.

Rhia opened her eyes again, frowning. She'd stumbled through it, repeating over lines and fiddling with translations, but each word she'd strung together had given me more knowledge, more strength.

Thank you, I said. Gratinoc. I hesitated. Why?

Her frown deepened. Because you deserve to know.

It wasn't anything I hadn't known, in a rotund, obtuse sort of way -- nothing I hadn't inferred or heard said -- but it was odd, to know that those same sentiments had been coming out of my mouth without any idea of their meaning. I'd scanned it,

sonnet-style, for gods' sake, rapped and rhymed the middle section to a little tune to put it into my mind -- theatre tricks. But --

Cassian hadn't lied. I felt a certain relief in that.

But there was more to it than what I'd been told, too. Ideas I'd only seen acted, never written down or spoken out loud for as far as I could understand were in paper and ink: *stand with the kings, or fall. The tyrant is here* -- it was the first time the words *rebels* and *tyrant* had truly been linked.

Gratinoc, I repeated. *I'll tell no one.*

I would not be the reason she was in trouble again.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.